Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.39119

The Limits of Equality: Wong Chin Foo and the Boundaries of Chinese American Activism in the Late Nineteenth Century

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Abstract. Wong Chin Foo (王清福) was one of the best-known nineteenth-century Chinese American activists against Chinese exclusion laws and policies introduced from 1882 onwards. However, existing historical records reveal contradictions between his commitment to freedom and equality and the political strategies he adopted. Drawing on existing scholarship and Scott D. Seligman's comprehensive biography, this paper examines these contradictions through Wong's own articles and letters, along with contemporary news reports about him. It focuses on two major contradictions: Wong's stereotyping of the Cantonese while defending the Chinese, and his support for restricting further Chinese immigration to prioritize the interests of the Chinese already in the United States, particularly their eligibility for citizenship. The analysis argues that these contradictions do not necessarily indicate Wong's insincerity towards his professed values. Rather, they reveal how political pragmatism, economic interests, and personal prejudice may have led him to compromise his commitment to those values. Wong's activism thus illustrates how opposition to racial exclusion could coexist with support for restricting further immigration from China. He also did little to address the wage competition that sustained anti-Chinese hostility. Examining these contradictions challenges the binary understanding of the struggle between white Americans and Chinese immigrants and clarifies the contested meaning of "equality" in early Chinese American activism.

Keywords: Wong Chin Foo, Chinese Equal Rights League, Chinese American activism, Kwong Tung, citizenship

1. Introduction

On September 22, 1892, nearly two hundred Chinese merchants and professional men joined a gathering of "over a thousand prominent Americans" at Cooper Union in New York in response to a call from the Chinese Equal Rights League [1]. The meeting protested the Geary Act enacted on May 5, 1892, which extended Chinese exclusion from 1882 for another decade and established an "internal passport system" imposed solely on the Chinese. Under the Act, those found without the required certificate of residence would be presumed to live unlawfully and would be subject to immediate arrest and deportation since May 6, 1893 [2]. Wong Chin Foo (王清福), secretary of the League and a prominent activist, journalist, and lecturer, described the persecution that Chinese people faced in the United States and denounced the law by appealing to "common manhood" and

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American political ideals [3]. His sustained efforts to reach the American public and build support for the League's campaign made Wong one of the best-known Chinese American opponents of the exclusion in the late nineteenth century.

However, Wong's commitment to freedom, equality, and common humanity was complicated. His writings and political practices reveal significant contradictions between the "American values" he upheld and the positions he took in response to the practical problems that the Chinese faced. While Wong challenged racial discrimination against the Chinese, he expressed strong prejudice against the Cantonese by portraying them as corrupt and greedy. Although he demanded equal political and civil rights for the Chinese, he also publicly acknowledged the benefits of restricting further Chinese immigration. This essay argues that these contradictions in Wong's position do not necessarily indicate subjective insincerity in his pursuit of freedom and equality; rather, they reveal how political strategy, economic interests, and his own prejudices may have led him to compromise his commitment to these values.

2. Rethinking the Chinese American activist

One of the most important books on Wong Chin Foo is the comprehensive biography written by the historian Scott D. Seligman. Although the biography is more accessible in style, it draws on a wide range of primary sources, including letters to Wong's son, Wong Foo Sheng, that Seligman discovered during their research [3].

Seligman notes that Wong Chin Foo, who was raised by American Baptist missionaries in Shandong, China, became a deft Chinese American journalist who could write "masterfully" in English [3]. Furthermore, Hsuan L. Hsu emphasizes the flexibility of Wong's writing styles in tandem with his shifting positions, which cannot be reduced to a binary understanding of "resistance" or "accommodation." Drawing on Viet Nguyen, Hsu describes such binary interpretations as "limited, polarizing options that do not sufficiently demonstrate the flexible strategies often chosen by authors and characters to navigate their political and ethical situations." Wong's writings accordingly ranged from "self-commodifying 'goodwill' to bitter political criticism," as he continuously experimented with his writing styles for different audiences to increase the persuasion through his words [4]. In other words, Wong's apparently conflicting words therefore do not necessarily indicate inconsistent political standing, but could reflect the different strategies he used as a writer.

Audrey Wu Clark also notes Wong's shifting positions; however, their focus is on his political perspective. Interestingly, Clark describes Wong as a political figure who was "difficult to place." Although he Americanized himself by "cutting off his long, braided queue and wearing American clothes" after spending several years in the United States, he insisted on his "unconventional heathenism" and challenged American marginalization of the Chinese. More importantly, Clark points out that Wong could resist the "exceptional minority stereotype" while at other times embracing it strategically "to advance his career." [5]. These oddities became especially important to Wong's political activism as he increasingly associated Chinese American citizenship with Western, American practices and mannerisms. As Clark notes, Wong eventually spoke specifically for the Chinese who had "cut off their queues, adopted the [American] national dress and language, and have made America their home for good." His own "exceptional assimilation" experience therefore became gradually connected to the type of Chinese Americans he preferred and advocated for [5].

Glory M. Liu takes a more specific perspective: Wong's attempts to appeal for Chinese American citizenship. Liu points out that Wong's political claims included an "unequal inclusion." Although Wong overall challenged Chinese exclusion, destigmatized heathenism, and argued for Chinese

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eligibility for American citizenship through "character and fitness," his approach still relied on the racist framework of American politics [6]. In other words, his alternative approach to citizenship did not seek to discard all barriers; instead, it promoted a carefully calibrated way of being Chinese, which visibly embraced "civilized" white American culture, as the new threshold. Besides, Wong did not intend citizenship to extend equally to all the Chinese. Liu emphasizes that his political strategy favoured the "Americanized Chinese… wholly of America, and cosmopolitan in nature," rather than newly arrived, poor labourers who did not intend to make the United States their permanent home and refused to compromise their cultural and ethnic contexts [6].

Although East Asian immigrant history in the United States has gained more attention in recent years, not as much scholarship has focused on Wong Chin Foo himself. Fortunately, Seligman was able to reach some of the precious primary sources that Wong's family preserved, preventing them from being lost and Wong's activism from becoming even harder to trace. Both Hsu and Clark note that Wong's narrative and political strategy could oscillate and could be quite self-contradictory, while Liu analyzes the fundamental limitations of his equal rights movement. Building on these works, the following sections investigate two of the most striking contradictions between Wong's values and actions to understand the motives, complexity, and limitations of nineteenth-century Chinese American activism.

3. The pursuit of "Chinese American" rights

Seligman comments in the preface that "a disciple of American democratic values, Wong was not cowed by anti-Chinese prejudice." [3] Indeed, Wong does seem to have believed in freedom and equality, values he associated with the United States. For example, in an 1884 *New York Times* report titled "Wong Chin Foo Assaulted," Wong used the phrase "I was defending my liberty" in his request for a warrant after a store employee pulled him into the store to make him purchase goods [7]. At the same time, Wong valued American recognition of Chinese culture and civilization for cross-cultural understanding. His attempts included introducing Chinese theatre to New York audience to help Americans know more about the Chinese community [3]. As Wong described in a letter to his son, Wong Foo Sheng, "My money, my life, and my happiness have been dedicated to the welfare of my poor oppressed countrymen everywhere." [3]. Wong's belief in "American ideals" and his concern for his compatriots thus seem to have been important motives for his activism. Wong expected change both from white Americans and from his Chinese brethren.

3.1. Replacing the "Chinese" with the "Cantonese"

Before further investigating the oddities in Wong's political speeches and practices, let us first examine the logic behind his activism. In 1864, the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) faced a persistent labour shortage due to the opportunities offered by the Gold Rush. As a result, the company increasingly turned to Chinese immigrant labourers after they demonstrated "strength, efficiency, and reliability." CPRR made the Chinese live in poor conditions and paid them wages 30% less than those of white workers [8]. After the railroad was completed in 1869, many then-unemployed Chinese entered the American job market, and "their willingness to work for low wages" made them competitive workers, since cheap labour meant higher profits for business owners [3]. This threatened job opportunities for white Americans, generating further racist claims from them that shifted the blame for capitalist exploitation onto Chinese labourers and further degraded Chinese living conditions. As the journalist John Swinton described, capitalists could exploit the vulnerable position of Chinese immigrants and make themselves "absolute dictators of

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labor in America." Although he stated the labour-capital situation clearly, Swinton still made strong anti-Chinese racist claims: the "inferior" "Mongolian type of humanity" would "permit the transfusion into the national veins of a blood more debased than any we have known" to endorse Chinese exclusion [3]. Such socio-cultural prejudice, which cast Chinese immigrants as a greater problem than exploitative American capitalists, created a vicious cycle of "racial discrimination—low wages and poor workplace treatment—labour-market tensions—further racial discrimination" for Chinese labourers.[1]

What Wong Chin Foo was trying to do was to break the racial discrimination stage of this cycle by demonstrating that the Chinese were not an inferior race but represented a civilization that was equal to, though different from, Western American civilization. For instance, in his "Chinese Cooking" (1884), in which he tried to introduce Chinese cuisine to the American public and attempted to address some cultural misunderstandings, he expressed this idea in the introduction: "The epicure flourishes in the Orient as well as in the Occident. In Europe he bows down before the genius of France; in Asia, before that of the flowery kingdom." [9] Wong employed multiple strategies, one of which revealed an obvious contradiction with his upheld values: his undisguised stereotyping of the Cantonese, Chinese from the province of Kwong Tung (廣東), as greedy, morally deficient profit-seekers [10]. How could Wong advocate for the Chinese while discriminating against them? Wong was well aware that "nearly all the Chinamen in America" came from "the province of Kwong Tung." [10] Despite this awareness, in an 1874 lecture in Boston, Wong described the Cantonese of San Francisco as "the lowest of all" Chinese, comparing them with the people of "China proper" in terms of "Chinese" and "Confucian" virtues [3]. His attacks on the Cantonese got more intense in his 1893 article "High and Low Life in China," in which he attributed much of the "American abuse of the Chinese race" to "the ill-doings of a mere handful of ignorant and avaricious Cantonese," arguing that the Chinese population most familiar to the American public did not represent "China proper." [10] In other words, Wong did not try to destigmatize the Cantonese. Instead, he strategically shifted racial accusations against the Chinese onto the Cantonese, attempting to distinguish the Cantonese from the people of "China proper" and thus construct a new image of the Chinese for the American public [11]. [2]In Wong's view, instead of the supposedly ill-doing "Cantonese" labourers Americans knew best, the "Chinese" could be "patriots" and "heroes." [10]

Furthermore, Wong might have had reasons beyond the demographic dominance of the Cantonese for choosing them as scapegoats. Firstly, since Wong was born and raised in Shandong, the home of Confucius himself, and demonstrated the influence of Confucianism throughout his

[1] John Swinton was a Scottish-born journalist described as "a champion of working men" in The First Chinese American (56). However, his anti-Chinese racial claim suggests that "a champion of white American working men" would be a more accurate description. His defence of the working class did not extend equally to Chinese labourers.

[2] To further this distinction, Wong offered an inaccurate historical account in "High and Low Life in China" (356) that portrayed Kwong Tung as originally one of the "petty kingdoms" annexed relatively late in Chinese history to the "Middle Kingdom," which he associated with "China proper." In fact, the Qin Empire (秦朝), the first imperial dynasty of a unified China, annexed Lingnan (嶺南) in 214 BCE. After the Qin collapsed, the region became part of the independent kingdom of Nanyue (南越) before the Han Empire (漢朝) officially incorporated it in 111 BCE. Michèle H. S. Demandt, "Reaching 'the Southern Wilderness': Expansion and the Formation of the Lingnan Transportation Network during the Qin and Han Dynasties," Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 63, no. 1/2 (2020): 168-70. This incorporation occurred more than three centuries before the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period (三國時期), which Wong referred to in "High and Low Life in China" (356) as the "Sang Qua war," supposedly "led by the immortal Kwong Koon" (關公).

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public life in the States, including his "all very Confucian" "left-handed compliment" to the Cantonese in San Francisco and his presentation of himself as "China's first [Confucian] missionary to America," there is good reason to suggest that his choice of target may have been influenced by the traditional Confucian disdain for merchants and that he may have held a genuine bias against Cantonese merchants beyond his strategic purposes [3]. Secondly, the stereotypical figure of the Cantonese merchant resembled that of the Jewish merchant, resonating with the antisemitism prevalent in Europe and the West and making the Cantonese a Jewish counterpart in the Far East, thus making Wong's claims more comprehensible to the American audience. Specifically, Wong borrowed an antisemitic description of the Russian Jews, claiming that "these Cantonese are ingenious and shrewd, great traders and artisans, feared by the merchants of the other provinces and hated by every other class of Chinese, as are the Jews in Russia." [10] In other words, he constructed the people of Kwong Tung as feared "outsiders" within the Chinese Empire, much like Russian Jews in the view of Westerners.

However, Wong's attempts to eliminate anti-Chinese discrimination in public discourse did not succeed to a great extent. Despite the vicious cycle in the American job market proposed above, the economic cause, namely, the wage competition between lower-paid Chinese labourers and the white workforce, remained one of the most direct and crucial driving forces within this cycle. Notably, although Wong gradually shifted from introducing Chinese culture to speaking for the Chinese in American politics during the 1880s, with one of the landmark events probably being his public challenge to the Irish-born anti-Chinese demagogue Denis Kearney in 1887, there is no evidence that Wong was involved in any kind of wage campaign in the United States. Although Kearney claimed that he "opposed the Chinese's coming here as serfs, peons, slaves," explicitly introducing economic terms into the immigrant-local conflict and the following discriminatory practices, Wong did not approach the problem by arguing that wages or working conditions of the Chinese labourers should be raised. Rather, he responded by drawing on his own lived experience as a Chinese immigrant who had not been brought to the States under contract and by attacking Kearney himself [3]. In other words, Wong attempted to break the cycle by challenging its racial assumptions but did little to address the economic tensions that continued to reproduce them.

3.2. "Chinese in America first"

The most shocking statement in Wong's political career was probably the claim made by the Chinese Equal Rights League in its 1892 *Appeal of the Chinese Equal Rights League to the People of the United States for Equality of Manhood*, in which it stated, "We do not want any more Chinese here any more than you do. The scarcer the Chinese here the better would be our conditions among you." [1] Notably, according to Seligman, "This document was unsigned, but Wong Chin Foo's fingerprints were all over it; it is almost assuredly his work," based on its writing style and the English proficiency of other members of the League [3]. Considering that Wong still presented himself as fighting for "the welfare of my poor oppressed countrymen everywhere" in his 1896 letter to his son, this conflict may suggest that Wong did not see this statement as contradicting his commitment to the Chinese and his values, but rather as a necessary strategic compromise that prioritized the interests of Chinese already in the United States, particularly in terms of their eligibility for citizenship [3]. This is manifested in a distinction within his approach to Chinese equality: no Chinese should be discriminated against on the basis of common humanity and "American spirit," but specific requirements of "character and fitness" should serve as the entry ticket to American citizenship [1]. Given that it is common practice for immigrants to meet specific requirements to gain citizenship, the distinction itself is less significant than how Wong and the

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League justified the partial exclusion of Chinese immigrants in the interests of Chinese Americans already in the United States and than what they considered necessary to become American.

This prioritization was also manifested earlier in Wong Chin Foo's political life. In his 1888 article titled "The Chinese in New York," he noted that "[the anti-Chinese bill] has cut short this tide of immigration," and that "the ten thousand Chinamen here are strongly in favor of it, for it has given them a close monopoly of [the laundry business]." [3] He therefore acknowledged the benefits of the Chinese Exclusion Act for the existing Chinese population because it stopped Chinese newcomers from entering a specific market already firmly dominated by Chinese immigrants in the United States. It is particularly interesting that this concern about Chinese newcomers competing with the existing Chinese population in the Chinese-dominated laundry industry resonates with the competition between Chinese labourers and white Americans in other white-dominated industries, which further suggests his missed economic focus in activism mentioned previously, as he did not specifically argue for an increase in Chinese wages or improvements in their working conditions, nor did he explicitly appeal for the Chinese to enter other industries rather than concentrating in the laundry industry due to a discriminatory social environment. However, this does not mean that Wong wholeheartedly supported the Chinese Exclusion Act, as he attacked the Act in the following year in an article describing a betrothed Chinese man who had to consider selling his property in America in order to marry a woman in Kwong Tung because the Chinese Exclusion Act forbade his return after the wedding in China [3]. This distinction between potential Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans shows that there was an internal hierarchy of priorities even within Wong's Chinese activism. It also poses an important question about Wong's traditional image as an anti-Chinese-discrimination activist and further reveals the limits and inconsistencies in his commitment to freedom and equality as his professed "American values."

Another possible reason for this distinction lies in his values regarding what characteristics made one worthy of becoming an American citizen. Wong sought to demonstrate the equality between Chinese and Western civilizations culturally in newspaper articles, as we have seen in "Chinese Cooking"; however, politically and in terms of personal values, he seems to have voted with his feet in favour of American ways as more "civilized." [9] This did not refer to equality and freedom, which he considered universal rights of humans, but rather to customs and dress, through which Chinese immigrants could become more Americanized. Wong and the League seemed to draw a clear line between the "Americanized," "determined-to-stay" Chinese and those who retained a more traditional Chinese identity and cultural practices. In other words, their vision of the United States was closer to a cultural melting pot than a cultural mosaic. This became more explicit in 1897, when the reorganized Chinese Equal Rights League appealed on behalf of "the Americanized and American-born Chinese" to the American public while distancing itself from those who retained Chinese customs or intended to return to China [3]. In fact, polished, well-educated, and Americanized Chinese such as Wong and some other League members might have contributed to their model of the Chinese Americans considered worthy of U.S. citizenship.

4. Conclusion

Overall, this article mainly focuses on Wong's conflicting words and actions in relation to the "American values" that he upheld. Although he partially defended the Chinese Exclusion Act in the interests of Chinese Americans, this does not necessarily mean that he was insincere in his belief in the notions of freedom and equality as common values of humanity that should be pursued in the States; rather, this indicates that he was a very strategic and pragmatic political figure, public lecturer, and journalist who compromised his pursuit of those values to better achieve his goals of

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.39119

claiming non-discrimination and equality for the Chinese, and most importantly, Chinese Americans already in the United States. In other words, it reveals to us that the Chinese struggle in the late-nineteenth-century United States was not a simple one between white Americans and the Chinese, but also included more layers even within the Chinese population based on regional origin, character, cultural practices, and permanence of settlement. His opposition to racial exclusion therefore relied heavily on practical strategies that focused on the effectiveness of being accepted by American society, although he himself failed to tackle the issue from a more practical, economic perspective, which made his efforts less successful than expected.

Furthermore, Wong's case raises a broader question about the meaning of equality in early anti-discrimination activism: whether opposition to racial exclusion necessarily meant the rejection of exclusion itself for the sake of egalitarianism, or whether it meant the redrawing of the boundaries of inclusion for different purposes that came from the background, attention, and interests of the activists themselves, such as Wong's prioritization of the Chinese already in the States. Understanding these boundaries does not diminish Wong's importance as one of the earliest Chinese American advocates for civil and political rights. Instead, it allows us to see his activism within the limitations of his own historical context, in an era over seventy years before Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. There are also many unresolved questions about this man, and his opposition to further Chinese immigration in the interests of the local Chinese community certainly deserves further investigation, which could provide important insights into Chinese immigration history and the immigrant experience in general.

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